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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 STATE 101142

SIPDIS

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TAGS: IN PGOV PREF PREL

SUBJECT: SCA ASSISTANT SECRETARY BLAKE'S SEPTEMBER 25,
2009 MEETING WITH BHUTANESE FOREIGN MINISTER TSHERING

Classified By: A/S ROBLAKE

¶1. (SBU) Participants:

U.S.

Assistant Secretary Robert O. Blake, Jr.
Don Camp, UNGA Senior Area Advisor
Matthew Lowe, SCA Special Assistant
Elena Soderblom, Bureau Notetaker

Bhutan

Foreign Minister Ugyen Tshering
Counsellor Tshewang Dorji
Bhutanese Mission Notetaker Tobgay

¶2. (C) SUMMARY. In SCA A/S Blake's September 25 meeting with Foreign Minister Ugyen Tshering on the margins of the UN General Assembly, Foreign Minister Tshering stated that Bhutan would continue to move "step-by-step" toward democracy. Tshering remarked that climate change will be the top priority at the upcoming SAARC summit hosted by Bhutan. He stated that the September 21 earthquake in Bhutan caused serious infrastructure damage, and that Bhutan would continue to request assistance from international donors (but he made no request to the U.S.). He requested enhanced educational exchanges to build on the start of the Fulbright program. A/S Blake offered disaster relief and welcomed the prospect of greater exchanges between Bhutan and the United States. He pressed the Foreign Minister to repatriate elderly refugees in Nepal. END SUMMARY.

"STEP-BY-STEP" TOWARD DEMOCRACY

¶3. (C) Tshering recounted the 2008 elections, which marked the deliberate, "step-by-step" process toward a constitutional monarchy. He remarked that the democratic transition has gone well, despite some "grumblings." Tshering said that he was proud of Bhutan's successful National Assembly elections in March 2008 which were completed in one day. He contrasted this with the situation in other countries, which spent weeks agonizing over electoral results. Tshering attributed Bhutan's efficient electoral process to the country's voting machines, which India had donated.

CLIMATE CHANGE AT 2010 SAARC SUMMIT

¶4. (C) He noted that Bhutan will chair the April 2010 South

Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) summit, which he expected will focus on climate change. He recounted that Bhutan took the chairmanship when the new Maldives government realized it lacked the financial resources to host the summit. Although the Bhutanese had previously lacked the educated personnel and infrastructure, the newly elected government realized that, after its successful elections, it would "never be more ready."

¶ 15. (C) Tshering expressed concern about melting glaciers, noting the danger of eroding natural dams of glacial lakes, Bhutan's dependence on water for energy, and the attendant need to fight mountain erosion. He stated that Bhutan continues to work on its adaptation and mitigation strategy, particularly in anticipation of the December 2009 Copenhagen Summit, which Bhutan's prime minister will attend. He noted that climate change is especially important to South Asia, but lamented the lack of broad agreements or coordinated regional strategy. He acknowledged the dysfunctional nature of SAARC, but expressed hope that Bhutan could help advance the region's multilateral relationships at the level of practical cooperation. Tshering further stated that he appreciated the growing U.S. focus on South Asia. A/S Blake echoed the importance of maintaining a focus on South Asia, and stated our hope that India will take a lead role in stabilizing the region by engaging its neighbors.

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EARTHQUAKE

¶ 16. (C) Tshering reported that twelve people had died in the 6.1 earthquake that shook Bhutan on September 21, adding that he was thankful that the loss of human life was not greater. He related that the earthquake caused infrastructure damage, a major setback to Bhutan. He stated that Bhutan will work first to rebuild buildings and communications systems. Tshering noted that Bhutan does not have a procedure in place for declaring disasters, and said that Bhutan will continue to request assistance from international donors to offset the costs of reconstruction. Blake explained that the U.S. frequently offers disaster relief, and would help Bhutan if asked (Tshering made no request).

BHUTANESE REFUGEES

¶ 17. (C) Blake noted that the U.S. has so far resettled over 17,000 Bhutanese refugees from Nepal and will continue to help more. Blake requested that Bhutan repatriate some refugees, particularly the elderly who call Bhutan home, as a humanitarian gesture. Tshering thanked the U.S. for the "bold decision" and compassionate gesture in helping the refugees. He stated that he will take Blake's request back to his government and that the Government of Bhutan will address this issue within the broader context of bilateral relations with Nepal.

EDUCATIONAL EXCHANGES

¶ 18. (C) Blake congratulated Bhutan on its acceptance of a U.S. Fulbright scholar in 2009, and expressed hope that there will be scope for more such exchanges. Tshering stressed his appreciation of the educational exchange opportunities and recalled that he had himself benefited from an education in the U.S. He related that an ongoing exchange program has facilitated the higher education of 9-12 Bhutanese students at the University of Texas at El Paso. He also reported that several international students currently study in Bhutan, including some from Korea, Japan and Maldives, as well as one student from the University of Texas at El Paso. He opined

that when donors ask the best way to assist Bhutan, he replies that increasing opportunities overseas gives Bhutanese a much broader education. He suggested doubling the Fulbright exchanges, enhancing the International Visitor Leadership program, and increasing U.S. scholarships. Blake welcomed a stronger educational partnership between the U.S. and Bhutan. While the U.S. government oversees the Fulbright program, it has minimal involvement in education, and Bhutanese students themselves could also explore the many scholarships offered by U.S. universities, Blake advised.

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